

U.S.-Mexico Defense Relations: An Incompatible Interface

by Craig A. Deare

Key Points

The United States and Mexico share a history that was shaped in the 19th century by numerous interventions by U.S. forces into Mexican territory and U.S. expropriation of considerable Mexican land. Although largely forgotten on the northern side of the border, this history has left a scar on the collective national psyche of Mexico, most notably on the military forces.

The American and Mexican militaries have evolved in distinct fashions over the past 100 years, and today have very different responsibilities, mission sets, orientations, and capabilities. In addition, a number of structural realities present on each side of the border, including a bilateral lack of trust, pose challenges for improved interaction and greater collaboration between the armed forces of each country. The combination of circumstances has created an “incompatible interface” in terms of U.S.-Mexican military interaction.

The Department of Defense should undertake a comprehensive review of potential areas of commonality between U.S. forces and their Mexican counterparts to identify missions and capabilities where the United States and Mexico could collaborate more effectively and find ways in which to cooperate constructively.

The U.S. national security community has begun to pay greater attention to Mexico in 2009. Reports of unprecedented (in recent history, at least) violence related primarily to

drug trafficking organizations (DTOs)¹ and speculation regarding the Mexican government's ability to adequately address the deteriorating security situation have reached the attention of the President, National Security Advisor, Director of National Intelligence, Secretary of State, Attorney General, Secretary of Homeland Security, and Secretary of Defense. This escalation of issues beyond the bureaucratic levels that routinely deal with Mexico in the security realm is unusual.

Although U.S. demand unquestionably is a major cause of the trafficking of drugs from south to north through Mexico and of weapons from this side of the border to the DTOs and other criminal groups in Mexico, these realities at first glance would appear to have little to do with classic military matters. In the United States, these issues are dealt with by law enforcement agencies, and the Department of Defense (DOD) plays a limited and supporting role. But within the context of transnational defense and security challenges of the 21st century that confront the Mexican state, and given the central role Mexican armed forces are playing in this war declared by President Felipe Calderón, the issue of the bilateral defense relationship with the United States becomes much more relevant. This is particularly so given public assessments by certain analysts that Mexico is on the verge of becoming a “failed state.”²

The U.S.-Mexico bilateral relationship is rich and dense across a broad swath of the

government and private sector, but for reasons peculiar to U.S.-Mexican history, matters related to security in general and defense in particular are traditionally distant.³ This reality was acknowledged recently by Defense Secretary Robert Gates: “I think we are beginning to be in a position to help the Mexicans more than we have in the past. Some of the old biases against cooperation . . . between our militaries . . . are being set aside.”⁴

The confluence of multiple challenges in early 2009—an international system undergoing shifts in power, the global financial crisis and a U.S. economy in recession, and a change in the U.S. administration, to name but a few—with the security threats in Mexico and the rest of the Western Hemisphere suggests greater attention is needed. Given Mexico's history and the vital role played by its armed forces in providing stability for that country, a review of the U.S.-Mexico bilateral defense relationship is in order. This effort reminds a U.S. audience of the shared history largely ignored north of the border and perhaps excessively recalled to its south; assesses the major structural challenges to improved cooperation between the two countries' military forces; and offers thoughts on ways to work through the incompatible interface.

This term *incompatible interface* refers to the fact that the armed forces that operate to the north and south of the shared border are quite distinct, and the “connections”

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between them are incongruent. They both conceive of, send, and receive “signals” in distinct fashions, with neither of the two being “correct” in and of themselves. Despite being neighbors, their origins, circumstances, and shared history have caused them to evolve in different fashions, resulting in quite dissimilar organizational cultures, responsibilities, missions, orientations, and capabilities.

Brief History

While it is unnecessary to explain to a Mexican audience why relations between the armed forces of both countries are strained—virtually every Mexican schoolchild is taught the events of 1836, 1846–1847, 1914, and 1917, the key dates of U.S. interventions against Mexican sovereignty—the reverse is not true in the United States. Only a small percentage of U.S. citizens are aware of what actions the U.S. Army and Navy performed in those years. And while the following events are ancient history for a U.S. audience, they formed a deep scar on the Mexican national psyche:

- The current U.S. state of Texas was an integral part of the nation-state of Mexico upon its formal independence from Spain in 1822. Texas became an independent republic in 1836 and was integrated as a U.S. state in 1845; neither of these events was formally recognized by the government of Mexico at that time.

- The U.S. Congress declared war on Mexico in May 1846, and U.S. forces operated in Mexico for more than 18 months, including the occupation of Mexico City. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (signed in February 1848) ended that war. In addition to Texas, approximately two-thirds of Mexico’s former territory (the present-day states of California, Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada, Utah, and portions of Colorado and Wyoming) was ceded to the United States, which paid \$15 million to Mexico for war costs and reparations.

- Admiral Frank Friday Fletcher led the occupation of Veracruz (often referred to

in Mexico as the Second U.S. Intervention) from April through November 1914. This action was ordered in response to the Tampico Affair.⁵

- Brigadier General John J. “Black Jack” Pershing led an expeditionary force of approximately 10,000 soldiers into northern Mexico (an event known in Mexico as the Punitive Expedition and the Third U.S. Intervention) for approximately 11 months (March 1916 to February 1917). The campaign was in retaliation for a raid by forces of Francisco “Pancho” Villa on U.S. territory in New Mexico.

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In the Mexican mind, these armed episodes combine with the perception of constant additional intrusions and affronts of all types—political, economic, social, cultural, and so forth. Perhaps the expression that best captures the Mexican sentiment is attributed to former general and president of Mexico, Porfirio Díaz: “Poor Mexico; so far from God, so close to the United States.” The reality that Mexico cannot escape its history or its geography is a fundamental element of this bilateral equation; the additional reality that the vast majority of U.S. citizens are largely unaware of these facts adds salt to a still open wound.

If it is true that the average Mexican citizen is aware of these historical events, the fact is that members of the Mexican armed forces are even more acutely attuned to them. The officer corps of the army and navy have deeply ingrained into their pro-

fessional ethos both the truth and myths of the attacks on their homeland by the invaders from the north. The additional fact that students from the army and naval military academies, the *Heróico Colegio Militar* and the *Heróica Escuela Naval Militar*, respectively, were involved in and suffered casualties from the U.S. actions exacerbates the scars. The most hallowed location in the *Heróico Colegio Militar* is dedicated to the *Niños Héroes* (Child Heroes), six cadets who died during the defense of Chapultepec Castle, the site of the military academy in 1847. And the formal education of the army officer corps further embeds the actions of an invading U.S. Army into the military professional culture. This historical baggage has long made the thought of cooperating with members of the armed forces responsible for expropriating their national territory unpleasant at best, unthinkable for some.

This background may help explain the Mexican military’s reluctance to have a close and friendly relationship with the United States. The fact that the Mexican military is primarily focused on defense and internal security matters (as required by the constitution)⁶ while the U.S. Armed Forces are oriented toward external threats and warfighting provides limited opportunities for collaboration. Nonetheless, a cursory historical review from 1940 onward indicates that despite the legacy of divergent visions of defense, the military relationship has been changing in a gradual yet positive fashion.

Mexican cooperation and collaboration in defense matters began during World War II. President Lázaro Cárdenas (famous for expropriating U.S. oil interests in Mexico just years before in 1938) offered President Franklin Roosevelt Mexican support in the event of an attack on the Americas, including military cooperation and use of Mexican territory and bases for U.S. forces.⁷ Among other tangible results, this offer led to the creation of the Joint Mexican–United States Defense Commission in February 1942. As stated in U.S. Executive Order 9080, “The purposes of the Commission shall be to study problems relating to the common defense of the United States and Mexico, to consider broad plans for the defense of Mexico and adjacent

Dr. Craig A. Deare is Professor of National Security Affairs in the Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies at the National Defense University. Comments may be directed to dearec@ndu.edu.

areas of the United States, and to propose to the respective governments the cooperative measures which, in its opinion should be adopted.”⁸ But the most noteworthy example of combined efforts during the war involves the 201st Fighter Squadron of the Mexican Expeditionary Air Force in the Philippines. Pilots from Mexico trained in the United States and flew combat missions in P-47s. Following the war, Mexico joined with other regional actors to form the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance of 1947 (better known as the Rio Treaty).⁹ These cases demonstrate that when the Mexican government perceives a threat to its security, it is capable of forming an alliance—albeit a limited and temporary one—to protect its interests.

However, following the war, the bilateral defense relationship returned to its traditional distant and guarded state. The United States became immersed in the Cold War, and for its part Mexico turned to internal matters related to political, economic, and social development. Not until the early 1990s, during the administration of President Carlos Salinas de Gortari, did there begin a gradual but notable change, characterized by greater economic interests and closer trade ties with the United States and culminating in the North American Free Trade Agreement. In the defense arena, the last general officer to serve as U.S. Defense Attaché, Brigadier General Joseph Stringham, USA, established a positive relationship with both the defense and navy ministries. Whether this improvement was due to Stringham’s personality or to guidance from the Mexican presidency to foster closer ties is not known. Nonetheless, it is apparent that in subtle but clear ways, the relationship began to thaw.

Beyond question, however, the major transformative period occurred between 1995 and 1997, when the two Secretaries of Defense, William J. Perry and General Enrique Cervantes Aguirre, established a professional and personal relationship. The leaders met in late 1994 during a visit by General Cervantes to the Pentagon, during which he invited Secretary Perry to visit Mexico. Although other such invitations had almost certainly been issued to U.S. Defense secretaries, this was the first to be accepted.

Secretary Perry’s interest in the region was exemplified by his conceiving and hosting the first Defense Ministerial of the Americas in Williamsburg, Virginia, in August 1995. In October 1995, Secretary Perry made the first-ever visit of a U.S. Defense secretary to Mexico, a fact that reinforces the distant nature of the traditional relationship. During that visit, in addition to meeting with President Ernesto Zedillo and Navy Secretary Admiral Lorenzo Franco, Secretary Perry stayed at General Cervantes’ guest house on Campo Militar No. 1. This warm and hospitable treatment by General Cervantes contributed to the growth of the relationship between the two men.

During that visit, Secretary Perry proposed and General Cervantes agreed to the establishment of the U.S.-Mexico Bilateral Working Group (BWG), an entity that would include the participation of the U.S. Defense and State Departments and of the Mexican defense, navy, and foreign ministries. A key to the initial success of the BWG was the high-level attention given to the effort; Secretary Perry charged Principal Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Jan Lodai as the U.S. leader, and Juan Rebolledo Gout, the Under Secretary for Bilateral Relations of the Foreign Relations Ministry, was designated as the Mexican lead. This was a necessary condition for Mexico to ensure that the interactions between the two militaries were overseen by foreign affairs specialists much better versed in U.S. policies than either *Defensa* or *Marina* (the defense or navy ministry). This move was mirrored on the U.S. side by including Dennis Hays, the director of the Office of Mexican Affairs at the Department of State. A number of sub-working groups were established, including counternarcotics, disaster relief, education and training, and technology, and significant coordination efforts began at the first BWG meeting hosted in San Antonio, Texas, in December 1995. General Cervantes was invited for a reciprocal visit to the United States in May 1996, during which several initiatives for cooperation were established, including the concept of transferring up to 73 UH-1H helicopters to the Mexican air force under

excess defense articles¹⁰ authority to provide Mexican special forces with greater mobility.

From 1995 to 1997, progress was made in several aspects (in particular in the area of training), and relations reached significant levels of cooperation. It was not easily accomplished, requiring sustained attention by senior DOD officials. However, with the departure of Secretary Perry in January 1997, the BWG effort lost senior-level interest and attention on the U.S. side. Despite the efforts of action officers in the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD), Joint Staff, and Service staffs, the bilateral relationship gradually began to return to that of distant neighbors. Evidence of this trend was seen by Mexico’s return of the helicopters to the United States in 1999, characterizing them as “junk.” This return to the status quo ante continued from 1997 through 2001, with relations perhaps best described as polite but cool. Secretary William Cohen did not visit Mexico during his tenure; other priorities emerged, and the BWG gradually fell into disuse, with the last meeting held in March 2000.

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Presidential elections in both countries coincided in 2000, and a change of administrations and political parties occurred on both sides of the border with the victories of Vicente Fox and George W. Bush. Fox’s election was historic in that the National Action Party (*Partido Accion Nacional*, or PAN) trumped the Institutional Revolutionary Party (*Partido Revolucionario Institucional*, or PRI), breaking the PRI’s 70-year hold on the executive branch. With George W. Bush’s victory in November, expectations were raised on

both sides of the border for improved bilateral relations. There were positive signs from the United States, with President Bush breaking with tradition by going to Mexico for his first foreign visit. Discussions between the two presidents about a common energy policy, immigration reform, and counterdrug policy were suggestive of a fundamental change in the status quo; expectations were raised, particularly in Mexico. And then the tragic events of September 11, 2001, occurred, and the world changed.

The Post-9/11 Environment

The changes to the U.S. national security structure following the 9/11 attacks are well known: the creation of the Department of Homeland Security, establishment of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, and within the Pentagon, the elevation of intelligence to the Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence, creation of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Homeland Defense, and formation of U.S. Northern Command (USNORTHCOM). Many bilateral issues were “securitized”—in particular, the key issues of free trade and migration—reigniting tensions between the two neighbors. In the defense arena, the establishment of USNORTHCOM,

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another regional combatant command in the Pentagon’s Unified Command Plan (UCP), caused concern in Mexico. Although USNORTHCOM’s main mission was (and

remains) the internal defense of the national territory of the United States, a secondary mission was theater security cooperation with neighboring countries Mexico and Canada. Prior to the UCP change, both Mexico and Canada were “unassigned” to any regional combatant command’s area of responsibility. In the case of Mexico, its limited security assistance funds had been managed by U.S. Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM) in Miami. But policy matters were left to relationships between the two Mexican secretariats—*Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional* (army and air force) and the *Secretaría de Marina* (navy)—and OSD, as well as directly with the Service chiefs (Chief of Staff of the Army and Chief of Naval Operations, respectively). The fact that the U.S. Government created USNORTHCOM without consulting as meaningfully and collaboratively with its neighbors as they would have liked troubled both Mexican and Canadian leaders. This displeasure manifested itself in large part in the Mexican press, which published articles raising concerns of being “assigned” to USNORTHCOM and of falling within USNORTHCOM’s area of responsibility. Defense secretary General Clemente Vega García testified before the Mexican congress that Mexico would not participate in USNORTHCOM’s operations or programs.

General Vega was simply reiterating some of the fundamental tenets of Mexico’s unwritten principles regarding its defense relations with other countries. These principles have evolved over time and are the result of Mexico’s interactions with external actors during the 18th and 19th centuries, and have been reinforced by its unique political development during the 20th century. They are guided in large part by the Mexican constitution of 1917, itself a product of the Mexican Revolution (1910–1917). Article 89, which establishes the faculties and duties of the president, further delineates the fundamental tenets of foreign policy for which the president is responsible. In his conduct of the nation’s foreign policy, the president will “observe the following normative principles: the self determination of peoples; non-intervention; peaceful resolution of controversies; and the proscription of threat or use of force in international

relations.”¹¹ As Mexico’s military evolved along with the rest of the country’s political, economic, and social institutions, its role as an actor loyal to the governing party reinforced its focus on matters of defense and internal security.¹² Four outstanding characteristics of that focus include:

- nonparticipation in military alliances (World War II was an exception)
- nonparticipation in international peacekeeping operations
- noninvolvement in external military operations (requires senate approval)¹³
- no presence of foreign troops on national territory (requires senate approval).¹⁴

Despite the history and tradition, President Calderón’s election in 2006 has brought a decidedly positive shift in the Mexican military’s disposition toward its U.S. counterparts. Given that the navy has routinely been more open and willing to engage with the United States, it is no surprise that they continue to do so.¹⁵ What is encouraging is President Calderón’s recent support for *Marina*’s participation in the 50th anniversary of the UNITAS naval exercise, as well as the Mexican senate’s formal authorization of that participation. More surprising and more encouraging are recent signs that *Defensa* is also willing to engage more actively, in particular with USNORTHCOM.

Thus, the Mexican military’s limited interaction with its U.S. counterparts is a function of both of the militaries’ cultures as well as the countries’ political underpinnings. The tradition of Mexican military noninvolvement in external military actions is as ingrained as the U.S. military noninvolvement in domestic law enforcement as proscribed by posse comitatus, and for a similar reason: national law. In both cases, decisions by the national legislature would be required to overturn statutes that were enacted for sound reasons based upon the realities of each country at given points in time.

Structural Challenges

Despite the weight of history and fundamental differences between the two countries, the reality is that levels of cooperation

between the Pentagon and the two secretaries in Mexico have improved over the last 15 years. However, a number of structural realities remain in each country that create obstacles to more effective cooperation. These impediments suggest that the likelihood of change significant enough to make a real difference in Mexico's military capability to conduct counter-DTO operations more effectively

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is small. Nonetheless, given the importance of Mexico's security to the United States, a greater effort to collaborate must be taken.

Mexican Obstacles to Cooperation.

Mexico has five significant obstacles to overcome to improve links with its U.S. counterparts: the continued existence of two service secretaries rather than a unified defense ministry; inadequate budgeting for the military realities of the country; lack of properly trained civilian leaders to exercise effective policy control over the two secretariats; widespread mistrust of the armed forces by other federal agencies; and domestic political realities.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, Mexico had a Secretariat of War and Navy, a consolidated ministry that oversaw both the army and the navy. For internal reasons related to diffusing power, President Lázaro Cárdenas decided to split the armed forces, and in 1937 reconfigured the Secretariat of War and Navy to become the Secretariat of National Defense. He subsequently created an autonomous navy department, which split off to become its own separate ministry in December 1940. Although the perceived requirement to divide the Secretariat of National Defense into two separate entities may have existed at that time, the current

lack of a unified defense ministry that leads and manages all the country's armed forces has consequences in terms of reduced military effectiveness for the country, although the Mexican armed forces publicly state that the current system works fine. Despite the challenges that would be involved with consolidating the services under a single secretariat, there are obvious efficiencies to be gained from such a move, to say nothing of the enhanced operational effectiveness of a more joint force. The fact that the Mexican Secretary of National Defense has four U.S. counterparts—the Secretary of Defense, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Chief of Staff of the Army, and Chief of Staff of the Air Force—is not conducive to a coherent relationship with the Pentagon. The fact that the Mexican Secretary of the Navy also has two counterparts—the Secretary of Defense and Chief of Naval Operations, as well as Commandant of the Marine Corps—further complicates matters related to more effective communication.

Mexico's total "defense" spending, which is a product of *Defensa's* and *Marina's* budgets, is approximately 0.4 percent of national gross domestic product. This amount is arguably insufficient for a country of the geopolitical importance of Mexico, and is certainly inadequate for the realities of a country with the military requirements it is currently facing.¹⁶ The aggregate number of military personnel, approximately 270,000, is inadequate for current mission requirements. Although President Calderón has indicated an increase in spending of approximately 25 percent for the army and 20 percent for the navy for 2009, significantly greater resources will be required to make a real difference. With approximately 80 percent of the defense budget allocated to personnel accounts, there is insufficient funding to pay for both the operations and maintenance required to prosecute the fight, much less to acquire additional materiel.¹⁷ And in terms of personnel spending, the relatively modest salaries paid to the lowest ranking soldiers probably contribute to the large numbers of desertions plaguing the army.¹⁸ It may be safe to assume that the low level of defense spending is intended to prevent the military from growing too large and assuming an even greater political role;

however, if the military is going to be successful in its mission in the near term, more resources clearly will be required.

Even before President Calderón tasked the military with the DTO mission, Secretary of Defense General Galván Galván told the congress in October 2007 that funding levels were inadequate: "The degradation of our military power is so great, that in the next five years this process may become irreversible."¹⁹ Although Galván was referring primarily to materiel, clearly the lack of time and funding has limited the military's ability to develop doctrine, techniques, and procedures to combat the DTOs. Lessons learned by U.S. forces in urban tactics against al Qaeda and other insurgent forces could be quite useful to Mexican operational planners, but perhaps difficult for Mexico to assimilate given their limitations. The underfunding of the military puts Mexican forces at a distinct disadvantage when interacting with their American counterparts because of the tremendous asymmetry in operational capability.

Most ministries of defense in democratic countries count on civilians to exercise policy leadership over the armed forces. Contemporary civil-military relations theory clearly establishes that democratic civilian control is a fundamental tenet to be pursued. To be fair, the issue of ministry of defense career civilian development in Latin America is still a work in progress, in most cases continuing to evolve following the return to democratic rule in the aftermath of military governments across the region. The absence of an effective and trained civilian cadre in the defense realm not only has internal consequences for Mexico, but also contributes to interoperability issues with its counterparts to the north. The military-to-military relationships, primarily service-to-service, are adequate as far as they go. But in the U.S. Department of Defense, the Secretary, Under Secretaries, Assistant Secretaries, and other officials are all civilians appointed by the President and confirmed by the Senate. They have no civilian counterparts in Mexico; the same is true for the cadre of civil servants who work in the Office of the Secretary of Defense. This situation is likely to take some time to change in Mexico, and for understandable reasons; neither *Defensa*

nor *Marina* is in a hurry to fall under civilian leadership that, in their view, is likely to politicize (and potentially corrupt) military affairs. Military officers note that most police forces are under civilian political appointee control, and levels of corruption are well known. Mexican officials would be well advised to study the many cases of defense ministry transition to civilian authority throughout Latin America to avoid making some of the mistakes made by others.²⁰

For reasons particular to Mexico's situation, the armed forces have operated for many years isolated from other federal agencies. In particular, there is widespread mistrust on the part of both *Defensa* and *Marina* with respect to law enforcement entities of all stripes—federal, state, and municipal—due in part to a lack of knowledge and interaction, but even more so to the widely held view that police forces are notoriously corrupt. The Mexican populace's perception of high degrees of ineffectiveness and corruption of law enforcement agencies is what led President Calderón to turn more decidedly to the armed forces to take on the DTOs and organized crime days after assuming office. While there undoubtedly are corrupt individuals in U.S. law enforcement, the majority of the American public trusts those institutions. The U.S. military's longstanding participation in the interagency process has shaped its doctrinal views, making it fundamentally different from Mexican armed forces.

Finally, but perhaps most importantly, the domestic political reality in Mexico is the strongest limitation to any significant change. Even if the Mexican military favored greater U.S. military involvement to support efforts in the fight against the DTOs, the major limiting factor is domestic Mexican politics. Politicians would adamantly oppose any U.S. military presence in the country in an advise-and-assist role, and this stance would most clearly manifest itself in the Mexican congress. Ironically, as recently as 1997, the body was viewed as a "rubber stamp," routinely supporting the lead by the executive branch. But in that year, the PRI lost its absolute majority in the congress, and given the PAN presidential victories and legislative gains in 2000 and 2006, the solid PRI executive-legislative bloc has disappeared. Nationalists

of all political stripes (including the PAN) would likely howl in protest at any suggestion of a U.S. military footprint, however small, on Mexican soil. And given the Mexican constitutional requirement for senate approval of foreign troops in country, the likelihood of carrying out General Barry McCaffrey's logical suggestion of sending a dozen UH-60 Black Hawks to Mexico to support the government is, unfortunately, remote.²¹

U.S. Obstacles to Cooperation. On this side of the border, basic constraints must be addressed for DOD to improve its interaction with the Mexican armed forces: the traditional lack of attention to Latin America in general and Mexico in particular; a misaligned organizational structure to deal with defense issues of the Western Hemisphere; the need to understand that although U.S. military priorities tend to differ from those of Mexico, there are areas of commonality; and, as in the Mexican situation, domestic politics.

One of the major challenges for DOD is the lack of attention paid to the region, a reality difficult to overcome for four basic reasons. The United States is a global player, and threats from other parts of the world are perceived as much more serious to its national security; the primary U.S. focus in the region has tended to be on stability, both political and economic; the major challenges confronting the region are developmental in nature; and the hemisphere's tremendously heterogeneous nature presents a complex array of security and defense issues to be addressed. It is only when those political and economic interests are threatened—as this case vividly demonstrates—that U.S. policymakers become aware of the "crisis."

Given these realities, the Pentagon has not routinely placed much emphasis on the hemisphere, save for periods of crisis (relatively recent instances include Grenada in 1983, Central America in general throughout the 1980s, Panama in 1989, and Haiti in 1994–2004). For understandable reasons, USNORTHCOM "was established October 1, 2002 to provide command and control of Department of Defense (DoD) homeland defense efforts and to coordinate defense support of civil authorities."²² Less understandable was why the mission to conduct security cooperation with Mexico was given to a command

whose mission "anticipates and conducts Homeland Defense and Civil Support operations within the assigned area of responsibility to defend, protect, and secure the United States and its interests,"²³ rather than to USSOUTHCOM, an existing combatant command whose primary mission is security cooperation and that interacts with most of Latin America—from Guatemala south—and most of the Caribbean. USNORTHCOM is responsible for interacting with Mexico, Canada, and some Caribbean islands. This arbitrary division violates the principle of unity of command and creates unnecessary seams between Mexico and Guatemala, as well as confusion in the Caribbean.

Another factor relates to the priority that the U.S. military has long given to combat operations external to the continental territory of the country. The recent policy decision to raise stability operations to the same level of importance as combat operations may change how the military operates in many ways, but most likely not in its expeditionary nature.²⁴ In contrast, Mexico has focused its efforts on defending the national territory from external attack or against internal threats. This reality, coupled with myriad other Mexico-unique issues, has resulted in armed forces organized, trained, and equipped differently from their counterparts in the United States. The current operational priority against the cartels and

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organized crime seems largely unrelated to traditional U.S. military missions. That said, there is no doubt that U.S. operational experience in Iraq and Afghanistan, to say nothing of Colombia and the Philippines, would have great utility for Mexican military planners as they develop doctrine to confront the

DTOs and other armed criminal elements. Learning from that operational experience, however, is both a policy and a political decision for Mexico. Although some limited sharing of U.S. experience is taking place through consultations as well as individual training and education opportunities in the United States, much more effective results would be obtained through collective unit training and operational activities in Mexico. Again, this is highly unlikely to occur for domestic political reasons on both sides of the border, but more so on the Mexican side.

The domestic political realities in the United States and the challenges they would present for providing enhanced funding and security assistance support cannot be ignored. Putting aside the financial and economic crisis affecting the United States, key issues of illegal immigration and border security are highly charged politically (recall President George W. Bush's failed attempt at immigration reform). Any conversation related to more funding and/or training for the Mexican military would generate uproar among constituencies of labor, border protection, human rights, and others. A case in point is the Mérida Initiative, named for the location of a March 2007 meeting between Presidents George W. Bush and Felipe Calderón, conceived to expand bilateral and regional cooperation to combat DTOs, gangs, and other criminal groups. As relatively modest a proposal as that was (although the fact that it was President Calderón's idea makes it an important project), it demonstrates clearly that despite a desire by both executive branches to work more closely together, the U.S. Congress has other ideas. Originally proposed as a \$1.4-billion cooperation package over 3 years in October 2007, only \$465 million was appropriated in the fiscal year 2008 Supplemental Appropriations Act,²⁵ and of that amount, only \$7 million has actually been spent.²⁶ In the interim, more than 7,000 individuals have been executed in drug-related violence in Mexico.

A final yet important element that should be explicitly acknowledged (the proverbial elephant in the room) is the lack of trust that exists on both sides of the border, originating within each society's set prejudices, biases, and antipathies toward the

other, based on certain elements of perceptions, half-truths, and stereotypes. As Alan Riding observed, "Probably nowhere in the world do two countries as different as Mexico and the United States live side by side. . . . Probably nowhere in the world do two neighbors understand each other so little. More than by levels of development, the two countries are separated by language, religion, race, philosophy, and history."²⁷ This unpleasant but certainly very real gut-level sentiment constrains each respective government's ability to propose policies and programs that further tie the two countries together.

An Incompatible Interface

In the United States, the agency with primary responsibility for combating narcotics trafficking is the Drug Enforcement Administration, assisted by other law enforcement agencies; in Mexico, it is now the military. In the United States, the agency with primary responsibility for enforcing Federal firearms laws is the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives; in Mexico, the Secretariat of National Defense controls weapons and their registration. In the United States, the agency with primary responsibility for attacking organized crime is the Federal Bureau of Investigation; in Mexico, that task has now been assigned to the military (at least temporarily).

As these examples make clear, each country has different realities, and each organizes itself differently to address those realities. The fact that the Mexican president has assigned the mission of combating the DTOs and organized crime to the military does not necessarily imply that the United States must assist exclusively or primarily militarily in that effort. After all, there are a variety of other inter-agency players that should and can play a supportive role in multiple arenas in Mexico, including the Interior Ministry, Public Security Ministry, and Attorney General's office; the United States can and should support those agencies. That said, and primarily because the Mexican military has the de facto lead, there could (and should) be an important role for the U.S. military to play, ranging from increased training and joint professional military education opportunities, to advice and

assistance across a broad range of operational activities. As undesirable as the Mexican military's key responsibility in the DTO fight may be for sound theoretical purposes, it is vitally important that it be successful. The greatest assistance the Mexican military could receive from the United States in the short term would be along the lines of Plan Colombia, both in terms of funding levels (Plan Colombia spent approximately \$6.3 billion over 7 years) and U.S. security assistance presence on the ground. Sustained interaction between U.S. and Colombian forces has significantly enhanced the Colombian military's tactical and operational effectiveness; no doubt simi-

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lar qualitative improvements could be achieved in Mexico with similar levels of effort. However, and based in great part on Mexican political sensibilities, the possibility of putting U.S. military forces on the ground in either an advisory capacity or in terms of operational support is highly unlikely (if not impossible).

Issues for Consideration

The use of the Mexican military to confront the DTOs is clearly not the preferred option. The long-term resolutions to many of Mexico's security concerns are fundamentally developmental in nature; the inability of successive Mexican governments to resolve essential political, economic, judicial, and social challenges have had the unintended consequence of contributing to increasing insecurity. Put another way, the rise of organized criminal entities, drug trafficking organizations,

gangs, and other expressions of violence is one of the unintended consequences of the failure of previous generations of Mexican governments to genuinely democratize, to generate market-based economic growth and wealth, and to instill a viable and respected system of justice based on the rule of law.

The preferred method of dealing with the actors responsible for generating much of the violence in Mexico is with legitimate, professional, and effective law enforcement agencies. Whether Mexico adopts a

it is imperative that the United States pursue every effort to assist both *Defensa* and *Marina* in their mission to defeat the drug trafficking organizations

Colombian or Chilean model (both of which rely on a single national police force that operates under the direction of the defense ministry), creates a Carabinieri force along the Italian model, or modifies its current model of state and municipal police forces supplemented by federal entities with specific jurisdictions is an internal matter. The most recent changes to the federal law enforcement system, implemented on June 1, 2009, appear as simply another form-over-substance exercise. In any case, fundamental reform will take time,²⁸ as well as continued political will by both the executive and legislative branches.

In the interim, the Mexican armed forces have been tasked with the counter-DTO mission. There are four fundamental risks associated with this tasking, any of which threaten to undermine the legitimacy and credibility of the military, the most respected governmental entity in Mexico:

- increased human rights abuses, which, according to the Mexican Human Rights Commission, have already begun
- increased possibility (if not to say likelihood) of corruption of the armed forces, both at individual and institutional levels

■ continued and deepened “militarization” of public security in Mexico, with associated risks of greater military involvement in nonmilitary affairs

■ lack of a “reserve.” If the armed forces are unable to break the collective backs of the DTOs, the president has no other available option, having already employed the last resort. Mexico does not become a failed state *per se*; rather, it continues to muddle through, with organizations such as the Juarez or Gulf cartels challenging the authority of the federal, state, and local governments to exercise legitimate control. How long the society can tolerate this situation is an open question, but it certainly cannot do so indefinitely.

Given these risks, it is clearly in the interest of the United States to collaborate more effectively with the Mexican government and its armed forces to assist in their success. And for that reason, it is imperative that the United States pursue every effort to assist both *Defensa* and *Marina* in their mission to defeat the DTOs. Domestic political realities on both sides of the border will make this a difficult undertaking. The question is whether the United States is sufficiently engaged to understand the implications of failure in the task to deal effectively with the actors associated with the violence in Mexico. President Barack Obama and members of his administration have spoken of the need for the United States to carry its share of the burden on its side of the border. This is a necessary but insufficient commitment to the problem. Success in Mexico is every bit as (if not more) important as success in Afghanistan. And given that reality, U.S. policymakers need to think of the commitment to Mexico in terms relative to those of our commitment in Afghanistan; this approach will quickly make clear that the \$1.4 billion of the Mérida Initiative is—at best—only a marginally adequate first step.

The case study that merits comparative analysis is Plan Colombia. Despite the differences between the two realities—and they are not insignificant, beginning with the fact that the DTOs in Mexico are not insurgents—there are certain obvious similarities. First and foremost is the growing strength of

illegal and illegitimate actors with access to arms and funds who challenge the authority of the state, similar in certain aspects to the situation of Colombia in the late 1980s and early 1990s. President Ernesto Samper’s ties to Cali DTOs were more nefarious; for his part, President Fox ignored the progressive growth of the DTOs, leaving President Calderón with a dire security situation. President Alvaro Uribe developed a policy of democratic security to turn the situation around; President Calderón assigned the task of defeating the DTOs to the military.²⁹ Keeping in mind the differences between the situations, there are many lessons learned from the cooperation with Colombia that DOD could apply with its Mexican counterparts.

DOD should recognize its critical role as the key agency capable of engaging successfully with both *Defensa* and *Marina*; it needs to think creatively and innovatively about how it can find areas of commonality and cooperate more effectively. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael Mullen understands this and is clearly interested: “Mexico is certainly more of a concern to me . . . certainly, with the deaths, the drug issues, the kinds of things that we’ve seen grow dramatically over the last year, and I know that we’re looking for ways to assist them in terms of addressing this kind of threat.”³⁰ The pending task is to discover how to do that. The following are some suggestions:

■ The Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Western Hemisphere Affairs (DASD WHA) could convene a high-level working group with the key DOD players, including those from OSD, the Joint Staff, USNORTHCOM, USSOUTHCOM, U.S. Central Command, and U.S. Special Operations Command, as well as the Services, to identify U.S. capabilities that could be employed by Mexican forces against DTOs. Once identified, the DASD WHA could lead a senior-level delegation to Mexico to engage with both *Defensa* and *Marina* to collaborate on their views regarding potential areas of commonality. More explicitly, the U.S. Secretary of Defense should propose to his counterparts in Mexico the reestablishment of the Bilateral Working Group.

■ DOD should acknowledge that the combatant command with experience in

developing, implementing, and overseeing the security assistance associated with Latin America is USSOUTHCOM. It is organized for providing security assistance and is much better staffed and experienced to support Mexico's current requirements than USNORTHCOM. The lessons learned from coordinating and implementing Plan Colombia reside in USSOUTHCOM and would be useful for Mexico's purposes. If properly coordinated and explained, Mexico's reaction might be more positive than when it was placed under USNORTHCOM.

■ Perhaps most significantly, if done correctly, this effort could prove a positive step to working through this incompatible but extremely important interface. If the Mexican military perceives that DOD is

if the Mexican military perceives that DOD is sincere in collaborating effectively, it could help begin to erode the historic mistrust and set the stage for improved interaction in the future

sincere in collaborating effectively to enhance their capabilities in a time when they are being tasked to accomplish critical missions for their national security, it could help begin to erode the historic mistrust and set the stage for improved interaction in the future.

More broadly, the U.S. policy community must rethink its operational organization; the Mérida Initiative is illustrative of the problem. The interagency coordination process at the national level works reasonably well to develop policy options; integrating the options at the operational and tactical levels is difficult, for each agency has its own individual responsibilities. In the case of Mérida, the stovepiped efforts of the Departments of Homeland Security, State, Justice, Treasury, Defense, and other agencies are largely doing their own individual missions, with no one effectively in

charge. Although both USNORTHCOM and USSOUTHCOM have interagency efforts, the shortcoming is that they are military organizations led by uniformed military officers, supported by interagency officials. Although certainly not unique to the Mérida case, a true whole-of-government approach would be significantly different, led by a senior civilian, in which the regional combatant commander is a supporting actor. An innovative solution would be to create a pilot DTO Issue Team, an interagency team dedicated to integrating the U.S. response as described in the Project on National Security Reform,³¹ staffed with representatives from the key departments, led by a senior civilian official with extensive experience in Mexico. Less likely to be truly effective is the newly appointed "border czar" because of the weakness of the position itself.

U.S. policymakers have two basic options: status quo or more innovative action. Given the historical and structural obstacles that stand in the way of progress on both sides of this relationship, the latter option will require top-level political commitment and sustained attention from senior officials in the White House and Departments of State and Defense. A similar effort will be required on the Mexican side for this effort to succeed. Absent such commitment to a truly strategic partnership, the relationship will continue along its current—less than optimal—path that does little to make it possible for the two countries to address problems they both face and advance to better and more mutually satisfactory relations.

Notes

¹ For a comprehensive review of the current state of threats being faced by Mexico, see Security in Mexico: Implications for U.S. Policy Options, RAND MG-876-RC (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2009).

² See, for example, George Friedman, "Mexico: On the Road to a Failed State," STRATFOR Weekly, May 13, 2008, as well as the 2008 Joint Operating Environment, available at <www.jfcom.mil/newslink/storyarchive/2008/JOE2008.pdf>, 34.

³ With due credit to Alan Riding's classic book on the bilateral relationship, *Distant Neighbors: A Portrait of the Mexicans* (New York: Knopf, 1984).

⁴ Comments during his interview on *Meet the Press*, March 1, 2009.

⁵ The Tampico Affair was, in essence, a minor confrontation between U.S. and Mexican soldiers in which Mexican soldiers pointed their weapons at the American troops. In that neither side spoke the other's language, confusion arose, and the situation escalated.

⁶ As specified in the Mexican constitution of 1917, article 89, section VI.

⁷ Raymond Estep, *United States Military Aid to Latin America*, Air University Documentary Research Study no. AU-200-65-ASI (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: Aerospace Studies Institute, Air University, 1966).

⁸ See <www.archives.gov/federal-register/codification/executive-order/09080.html>.

⁹ It is ironic to note that President Fox, speaking to the Permanent Council of the Organization of American States, indicated his intent to withdraw from the treaty on September 7, 2001, just days prior to the terrorist attacks of 9/11.

¹⁰ The helicopters were transferred under section 506(a) (2) Excess Defense Articles, which stipulates that they are available "as is, where is"; they had the advantage of being "free," but they were still Vietnam era vintage aircraft.

¹¹ Mexican constitution of 1917, article 89, section X.

¹² The literature regarding the Mexican military's evolution is plentiful, in particular Roderic Ai Camp's *Generals in the Palacio: The Military in Modern Mexico* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); and *The Mexican Military on the Democratic Stage* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2005).

¹³ Mexican constitution of 1917, article 76, section III.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ *Marina* has participated in coincidental operations with both the U.S. Coast Guard and U.S. Navy since the 1990s. In addition, they have liaison officers at both USSOUTHCOM's Joint Interagency Task Force-South in Key West, and at USNORTHCOM in Colorado Springs.

¹⁶ While the Colombian and Mexican realities are certainly different, it is worth noting that Colombia spends about 4 percent of its gross domestic product on defense (in fairness, these

figures include the national police, formally part of the defense ministry).

¹⁷ See Jorge Luis Sierra's analysis in "Unas fuerzas desarmadas," *El Universal*, February 15, 2008. He cites *Defensa* as spending 85 percent on personnel accounts, with *Marina* spending 72 percent on personnel accounts.

¹⁸ According to information obtained by the *El Universal* newspaper, more than 18,000 soldiers deserted in 2008, on top of an additional 150,000 over the previous 8 years.

¹⁹ Roberto Garduño y Enrique Méndez, "Equipo y materiales del Ejército, obsoletos, advierte el general Galván," *La Jornada*, October 10, 2007.

²⁰ There are almost as many models as countries in the region, with four led by active duty military officers (Mexico, Guatemala, Dominican Republic, and Venezuela) and one by a retired military officer (El Salvador). Those that merit close analysis include Colombia, Argentina, Brazil, and Chile.

²¹ William Booth and Steve Fainaru, "U.S. Aid in Drug Wars Criticized," *The Washington Post*, April 5, 2009, A1.

²² See USNORTHCOM Web site, <www.northcom.mil/About/index.html>.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Department of Defense Directive 3000.05, "Military Support for Stability, Security, Transition, and Reconstruction (SSTR) Operations," November 28, 2005. Paragraph 4.1 states: "4.1. Stability operations are a core U.S. military mission that the Department of Defense shall be prepared to conduct and support. They shall be given priority comparable to combat operations."

²⁵ Another \$300 million is currently in the Fiscal Year 2009 Foreign Operations Appropriations Act.

²⁶ Booth and Fainaru.

²⁷ Alan Riding, *Distant Neighbors: A Portrait of the Mexicans* (New York: Vintage, 1985), xi.

²⁸ A recent column in *El Universal* newspaper cites Monte Alejandro Rubido García, technical secretary of the Mexican National Security Council, assuring that the Army will be "on the streets" until 2013. See Jorge Luis Sierra, "El Ejército en las calles: los riesgos de seguir militarizando la lucha antinarco," *El Universal*, April 21, 2009.

²⁹ An interesting analysis is provided in Vanda Felbab-Brown, "The Violent Drug Market

in Mexico and Lessons from Colombia," Policy Paper 12 (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, March 2009).

³⁰ Comments during a press conference in the Pentagon on February 25, 2009.

³¹ See Project on National Security Reform (PNSR), *Forging a New Shield* (Washington, DC: PNSR, November 2008), 490: "Issue teams are interagency teams that use supporting department and agency assets and the infrastructure built in geographic offices to move policy forward on an issue. They are the central hubs for end-to-end issue management, integrating diplomatic, military, economic, aid, intelligence, law enforcement, and other national security system capabilities. They allow issue management to be conducted below the level of the president, greatly expanding the number of challenges the national security system can manage."

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Global Strategic Assessment 2009: America's Security Role in a Changing World

Edited by Patrick M. Cronin
NDU Press, September 2009

from the Introduction

Although the United States cannot afford to be the world's exclusive security guarantor, the world is ill-prepared for U.S. retrenchment. This Global Strategic Assessment offers a conceptual pathway for U.S. policymakers to begin recalibrating America's security role to reverse what has appeared a widening gap between U.S. ends and means, now and in the future. International security requires U.S. active engagement, but the character of that engagement is changing along with the global environment. Worldwide trends suggest that the United States will increasingly have to approach complex challenges and surprises through wider and more effective partnerships and more integrated strategies. This volume explains the complex security environment and how in particular the United States can begin the process of strategic adaptation.

Complexity is the watchword of our century. This assessment should be a healthy reminder of just how complex—and dangerous—a world we live in. That complexity was encapsulated by the Greek poet Archilochus, who said that the fox knows many things but the hedgehog had only one big idea. During the previous administration, the United States conflated security under the umbrella of a “global war on terror” and focused on a single big idea. Thus, in this volume a central idea, if not an organizing principle, is that the United States will have to be as clever as the fox, keeping its eye on multiple challenges and taking care not to exert

its finite resources on any single problem. Preparing for and dealing with such profound complexity requires particular capabilities, approaches, and proclivities: cultural, developmental, experiential, technical, organizational, political, and operational. These attributes can be selected, cultivated, and enhanced, and it seems that they will have to be if we are to survive, let alone succeed.

This book attempts to bridge the gap between theory and praxis, but it is not a policy blueprint. As suggested above, its overriding message is to emphasize global complexity and America's vital yet limited role in coping with that complexity. Some critics of this volume will hew to a traditional view of security and the world, claiming that the threats are far more straightforward and the world quite predictable. Indeed, the world of tomorrow will carry on with a great deal of continuity. It is also fair to say that this volume tries harder to identify change than highlight that continuity. Even so, the gist of this research undertaken by 125 scholars suggests that policymakers and analysts are only beginning to come to terms with the uncertain, complex world in which we operate. For instance, too little systematic thought has been given to the dynamic interactions between state and nonstate actors or between economics and security, to cite only two issue areas. Moreover, to the extent that officials and analysts are able to stay on top of global trends, they also realize that our prescriptions, policies, and strategies tend to lag woefully behind them.

Today's world is marked by the uneasy coexistence between traditional geopolitics and ever-widening globalization. A fundamental question undergirding this volume is how the United States can best use its essential and yet insufficient influence in a world marked by both rising state power centers

and the devolution of power into the hands of more nonstate actors. Clearly there is no simple prescription for the problem of how the United States can best exert its influence in this dynamic security landscape. Even so, the breadth of threats, challenges, and opportunities that may surface in the coming years will require a comprehensive approach that utilizes the full continuum of power—be it hard, soft, smart, dumb, or fuzzy. Complexity should not be an excuse for ignoring clear, urgent, and obvious dangers, but responses to those threats must better assess the side-effects and opportunity costs of neglecting the full array of challenges confronting the United States and the world. In short, there is no substitute for making conscious choices within a grand strategic perspective: the world cannot afford for us to be narrow, near-sighted, or parochial. . . .



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